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THE GREAT WAR

From SPECTATOR to PARTICIPANT

By

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THE GREAT WAR: FROM SPECTATOR TO PARTICIPANT.¹

By ANDREW C. McLAUGHLIN, *Professor of History, University of Chicago.*

WHEN the war broke out in 1914 everyone in America was astonished and almost everyone was quite unable to understand the fundamental causes of it. Many of us were more than astonished; we were thoroughly out of patience and without immediate and deep sympathies for either side in the struggle. America had lived in isolation. Though our Government had been to some extent drawn into the swirl of world politics, we had no deep-laid scheme for exploitation of inferior races, no colonial ambitions, no determination to force our products on other nations and no fear of neighboring governments. We did not know that we were being jealously watched and that spies recorded our temper and our frailties. We did not see that we had anything to do with a European war. Of the ever-vexed Balkans we knew little or nothing, though we had heard of the "sick man of Europe," who seemed to be an unconscionable time in shuffling off this mortal coil. We had read of Hague conferences and peace societies and peace palaces, and believed that war was too absurd to be really possible between the nations of western Europe.

With the invasion of Belgium we began to rub our eyes. We found that a region which had been known as the "cockpit" of Europe was once more to be beaten down by the tramp of alien armies. And then came the stories of atrocities in Belgium. At first we read with doubt, and only after the publication of the "Bryce Report" with the supporting documents did we see the realities and believe the unbelievable. We discovered what militarism meant in its final qualities, militarism which included devastation and

¹ Revised and reprinted from the *History Teacher's Magazine*, June, 1917.

terrorism as portions of military policy. Belgium settled our sympathies, for we saw that the whole thing was premeditated; we realized that methods of mobilization, not to speak of strategic railroads, are not mapped out in a moment. International bullying, *Machtpolitik*, was shattered when it shocked the conscience of the world. John Bright, I believe it was, said that the only value of war is to teach geography; but this war has taught language; everybody knows what *Schrecklichkeit* means, and everybody knows too that it is involved in the philosophy of war when it is carried out with relentless thoroughness and with absolute disregard of the ordinary promptings of humanity.

The attempts of German propagandists to justify the invasion showed an astonishing inability or unwillingness to make frank use of public documentary material. Documents found in the Belgium archives showed that some years ago an English military officer and a Belgium official had consulted together as to what steps England should take in case Germany invaded Belgium. After Germany had done the very thing which England and Belgium had feared, German propagandists tried to justify her by declaring that Belgium was considering means of preventing it. The use made of the documents actually affronted our intelligence and added to our distrust.

At that time we began to study deliberately the problem as to which nation was responsible for the war. It is now unnecessary to enter into the details of this question. None of the nations of Europe had been free, the world had not been free, from a species of intrusive, aggressive nationalism and from jealous rivalry in trade which made the maintenance of peace exceedingly difficult; colonial ambitions and dollar diplomacy had long daily threatened the peace of the world. This we knew; but even if no one nation was solely responsible for a condition which made the maintenance of peace difficult, we were compelled to conclude that the outbreak of hostilities was primarily chargeable to Germany; and, as we realized this, we became certain that America would hope for the defeat of the German armies. As we studied the situation it became plain that war was due either to a national panic or to premeditated determination to

gain territory and power by immediate action. The whole mind of Germany was prepared for it; war and armies, engines of destruction, the jealous enmity ascribed to foreign nations, the loudly proclaimed perils of the Fatherland—those things kept constantly in men's minds for years—laid the train for the conflagration. That the Teutonic powers deliberately planned a war in 1914 is indicated by considerable evidence. Though to-day some may think this evidence not entirely final and conclusive, it doubtless had its effect on everybody acquainted with the history of the last decade. This at least appeared certain: The military authorities in Germany, directly and with amazing forethought, planned for a war which must come soon, and they were determined to win for the country a "place in the sun" and establish its power. If authorities are convinced that a war is inevitable and approve what they confidently believe will be its outcome, are they not likely to grasp the favorable moment for beginning hostilities?

It is sometimes said that Germany intended to dominate the world. We had great difficulty in believing in the existence of such fantastic ambitions, but we came slowly to see (1) that Germany believed in the superiority of German efficiency and of German culture, and thought they must be made triumphant; (2) that at least the ruling classes had a curious incapacity to understand that political control was not necessary to the extension of influence, to permeation of thought, and even to the development of trade; (3) that these persons were determined that the world should live in awe of Germany, and if rivals threatened to prosper they must be beaten into becoming humility.¹ Although all this is probably below the truth it is so preposterous that we still have moments of doubt; and yet a person who has had unusual opportunities for knowing the situation, and has but recently returned, after some years of residence in Germany, tells us, "The Battle of the Marne not only saved the allies—it saved Germany." That is the opinion even of a large part of the people of Germany. In the defeat at the Marne

¹ If anyone disbelieves the understatement above, he ought to read "Hurrah and Hallelujah," a book largely made up of documents collected by a Dane, Prof. J. P. Bang, of Copenhagen.

the hope of a world dominion was shattered. The lunacy of the war lords then in control was changed.

Still, as we began to realize all these things, we did not yet feel that it was our business to enter the conflict, not even when we came to see that America herself was in actual danger, certainly in actual and immediate danger if Germany was not defeated by the allies. We were loath to credit what appears to be the truth, that, to attribute to the Kaiser the offensive words of Napoleon—America was within the scope of his policy. Possibly it was shameful in us to wait and to rely on the allied powers when we began to feel that this defeat imperiled our own safety. But something more than fear was needed to force us into the fight; not until the issues were clear to the nations of the world, not until there was hope for a constructive peace, not till we heard the call of humanity were we prepared to fling in our power and resources.

Doubtless our final entrance into the conflict was brought about by cumulative irritation at German methods and policies. Our conviction of their unworthiness grew gradually day by day. This conviction was the result of experience of having actually lived through a great crisis. Among these irritations, which opened our eyes and hardened our hearts, none was more powerful than the machinations of the German spies. We were more than irritated, we were enlightened; we discovered what *Weltpolitik* and *Realpolitik* really were; German espionage in this country helped us to grasp the nature of a principle which is essentially criminal and which, if it continues, must make decent international relationships quite impossible. And so this fact began to stand out strongly: Democracy can not survive in an atmosphere of indecent intrigue; the Government at Washington was forced to conclude that we can not act in friendliness or cooperate with a government whose ways are devious, ungenerous, purely selfish, and unreliable.

It is perhaps unnecessary to speak of Zeppelin raids, poisonous gases, and deportation of men and women from the occupied portions of France and Belgium, although we have no right to forget these facts; they are natural products, once more, of militaristic doctrine. We must remember

that, if war means these horrors, all our efforts may well be directed against the prolongation of war and the success of militarism. Civilization is actually at stake unless something can be done to establish a decent working order among the nations of the world.¹

About the beginning of 1915 Admiral Tirpitz was reported to have made a statement about the use of submarines for destroying merchantmen, and about the beginning of February an effort was made to establish a war zone about the British Isles. At almost exactly the same time England put food for Germany on the contraband list, her technical excuse being that Germany had taken government charge of all food in the Empire and thus could use all of her food as a basis of war. The diplomatic controversy that arose over the questions of contraband and blockade and war zones can not be entered upon here in any detail. It is apparent to my mind that Germany can not excuse her attacks upon merchant vessels on the ground that she was merely retaliating against the British policy of starvation, though it is not unlikely that Britain would have attempted to use her fleet for that purpose even if Germany had not brought her submarines into play—just as Germany starved Paris in 1870. And especially is retaliation not tolerable when it is exercised without any reference to the rights and lives of neutrals. If Great Britain broke the rules of international law or violently extended them for her purposes, there is a very marked "difference between a prize court and a torpedo." Moreover, the British dispatches to this Government attempting to justify her procedure are certainly able and rest in no small degree on our own acts during the Civil War.

Britain guarded and guided our trade even with neutral countries through which goods could be sent to Germany; but we could hardly be asked to do more than register complaint in the hope of reserving grounds for reparation or

¹ Those that are still troubled about our entrance into the war should remember what was said by our commissioners who had been carrying on relief work in Belgium "We wish to tell you," they said to President Wilson, "that there is no word in your historic statement that does not find a response in all our hearts. * * * Although we break with great regret our association with many German individuals, * * * there is no hope for democracy or liberalism unless the system which brought the world into this unfathomable misery can be stamped out once for all."

maintaining the technical rules of law. Did we have ground for claiming damages? Perhaps; but our trade prospered tremendously and increased greatly even with the neutral countries adjacent to Germany.¹

With the sinking of the *Lusitania*, May, 1915—a shameful and premeditated crime—President Wilson wrote sharply to the German Government asserting that we should defend our rights upon the high seas. It seemed at that time our evident duty to maintain as much as possible of the shattered fabric of international law. Although some persons thought we ought to enter the war at once, the President was not at that time prepared to advise such action. He still clung to the belief or the hope that by reiterated declaration of the fundamental principles of justice and humanity Germany might be brought to a reasonable course of conduct and that some of the principles wrought out by past centuries might be preserved. What is the value of international law if it is to be cast to the winds when observance is inconvenient? After the *Sussex* affair, in the summer of 1916, our relations with the German Government were again greatly strained, but President Wilson succeeded in getting a promise that merchantmen should not be sunk without warning and without saving lives unless the vessel should resist or attempt to escape. This promise was coupled with a condition that we should compel Great Britain to surrender what Berlin asserted to be an illegal blockade. Remembering, possibly, the net into which Napoleon enticed James Madison about 107 years ago, our Government did not accept the condition, but warned Germany that her obligations were “individual not joint, absolute and not relative.” We rested easier; but we now realized that this willingness to forego the sinking of peaceful vessels and the taking of lives can be accounted for by the fact that the old U boats were being destroyed and the Teutonic powers did not then have in readiness the large and improved monsters of the deep with which to carry on

¹ While, in my judgment, Britain, in some respects broke away from the restraints of international law or unduly extended precedents that appeared to justify her, the question is by no means an easy one, and I have heard an able international lawyer say that, if the subject were submitted to an impartial tribunal, he would be by no means certain of a decision in our behalf.

the work of destruction. Conditions were bad enough during the latter half of 1916, but with the beginning of the new year ruthless warfare was openly and brazenly instituted. With the announcement that no warning would be given when ships were sunk within a war zone (1917) cutting off nearly the whole coast of western Europe, President Wilson sent the German ambassador home and war seemed inevitable. One of the astounding revelations of the political methods of the German foreign office was the announcement, made by the chancellor to the Reichstag and the German people, that President Wilson had broken off diplomatic relations abruptly, although the step was taken 18 months or more after the exchange of dispatches on the *Lusitania* crime and half a year after the exchange of notes about the *Sussex*.

So far we have given only a meager outline of the story and told it ineffectively, for not even in many words can one sketch the growing uneasiness and distrust, the sense of despair, or the conflict between despair and hope. Was the world falling? Was civilization being wrecked in the whirlwind of barbaric passion? Had Germany already destroyed civilization by bringing the world to see that there could be no faith between nations, and that at any juncture, on the spurious plea of necessity, frightful wrong could be committed? If this war ended in German victory, a victory won by years of devoted preparation, a victory won by submarines and Zeppelins and poisonous gases and deportation of men, women, and children to work in the fields and factories of the conquering country, what was before the world? German victory appeared to mean the success of ruthlessness, of conquest by military preparation; it meant the enthronement of might; and it meant that we must henceforward live in a world of struggle—we and our children after us.

Why did President Wilson, after long effort to maintain neutrality and even hasten the coming of peace, finally advocate war? Before attempting to answer this question let us recall the President's efforts to bring the conflicting nations to a statement of their terms, and to hold out to the world the conception of the establishment of permanent

peace. The President's message on this subject came out almost simultaneously with Germany's proposal in which she suggested peace on the basis of an assumed victory for her army. Such a peace the allied nations could not accept without accepting militarism, without losing the all important objects for which millions of men had already given their lives; and probably most of us here in America believe that such proposals were put forth chiefly to make the German people believe that the allies were the aggressors and must bear the odium of further conflict. When the President called on the warring nations to state their terms of peace, possibly he still cherished the hope that, if terms were frankly stated, negotiations might actually be begun; almost certainly he desired such open statement as would show to the world at large the real essence of the conflict and also show that we were not ready to enter the struggle until we had made every possible effort to bring peace. The President's appeal produced no very tangible results, although the allied powers stated their desires and purposes with considerable definiteness, and these terms did not on the whole appear to us unreasonable or unworthy.

All through this time the President and all thinking Americans were interested chiefly in the maintenance of civilization, and they looked forward not merely to victory or to acquisition of territory by one or another nation, but to the foundation of a lasting peace by the establishment of principles of justice and reason. We found that we could not paint in too dark colors the future of the world if we are all to remain under the pall of fear and suspicion and under the overwhelming burden of armament; and thus we came to see that without America's entrance into this war there was little hope for relief from the crushing weight of war and the almost equally burdensome weight of ever-increasing armed preparation. Never, it appeared, in the long history of mankind was there such a fearful alternative; never a louder call for duty. America, without hope of profit, with no mean or hidden purpose, must herself fight to maintain the principles of civilization and for the hope of lasting peace and propriety between nations. This growing belief that we must fight for peace only gradually conquered most of us; for we had long

believed that American influence for peace was to come from remaining peaceful; and for this principle, we may still maintain, there is much to be said. The creative forces of the world, we may still remind ourselves, have sprung from character. America, by her successes in popular government, by a reasonable amount of respect for herself, has helped to build up the democratic spirit and the democratic power from Peking to Petrograd and from London to Quebec and Melbourne.

This, I say, we believed. But several things showed us that this just idealism is for the present impracticable. (1) German philosophy scouts and flouts the notion that a state must not use its power to dash down opposition. (2) German success would mean the victory of *Machtpolitik*—a victory for the very forces which pacific idealism decries. (3) If we expected to bring into the world an appreciation of rights and duties, if we hoped for influence in the adjustment of world affairs, if we wished to see a world we could live in, it was necessary in time of trouble to do our part. The President had striven not only for our rights, but for the maintenance of law. Under much harsh criticism at home he went to the very limits of proposals; he offered his assistance; he announced that there was such a thing as being “too proud to fight;” he spoke of “peace without victory;” he hoped that the war could be settled in such a way that the nations after the war could live without hatred; he insisted that the world must be based on an organization, not for war, but for peace and good neighborhood. But strive or struggle as he might, it became daily more apparent that we should have little or nothing to say after the war, if we, unwilling to act now, called upon the nations to enter into a league of peace or summoned them to the establishment of a new world order. If we held back, contenting ourselves with verbal threats and coaxings, we should not have a single friend in the wide world unsuspecting of our motives.

Thus far I have said little about the actual attacks on American rights and property. It is not necessary to say much, though they reached into the intolerable. Nor do I wish to dwell on affronts to American honor, for I do not highly value the code of the duelist. We can well remem-

ber, even in international affairs, that no one but one's self can stain one's honor, and that no nation can smirch another nation's spirit. We were, as I have said, confronted by a world situation in which we must play a strong, manly, and honorable part. We despaired of a world in which millions of people could be thrown into war; millions of young men could be buried in trenches on the battle field or left to rot under the festering sun of France or Poland; millions of children could be beggared or stricken by disease, because an emperor and secret government had willed it so, or because nations could not learn the simple lessons of decent intercourse. What untold anguish might have been saved had the impetuous, sword-proud William consented to discussion, as Britain pleadingly asked him to do during the last days of July, 1914.

In his war message, April 2, President Wilson announced that the American people felt no hostility to the German people, but that we could deal no longer with an ambitious, autocratic Government which cast a nation into war with no apparent hesitation and without discussing their wishes. We are told, even in these days, that there is no distinction between the people and the Government of Germany, and that to assert such dualism is to disregard the most evident fact. Certainly the great masses of the people have sacrificed their lives for the Fatherland, and yet one of the most whimsical products of this war is that some men here in America should be asserting the unqualified serenity of the political atmosphere of Berlin just when William announced that this war had taught him the faithfulness and reliability of the common people and that political changes must come, and when Hollweg told the junkers that their day of domination is nearing its end. William has been taught something by the war. Did he have to see a million Germans slaughtered, did he have to hear the cries of the widows and the fatherless, did he have to see blinded men learning their letters and crippled boys creeping along the streets of Berlin, before he could learn that the people could be trusted? Every recent incident in Germany has demonstrated the weakness, not to say the criminality, of the imperial political régime.

"Still," some person will say, "Germany is not what Russia was. To class Russia, with its cruel, cheap, mercenary bureaucracy and Germany together as autocracies is to do violence to patent facts." I shall not seek to show how nearly the governmental system of the Empire approaches in reality the autocratic type and how largely the responsibility for all imperial acts rests in the hands of the Prussian King and a body of irreconcilable aristocrats. Of this much could be said, but we can omit all discussion of the quasi-representative institutions of the Empire. The trouble is deeper than mere forms of Government; for the circle that shaped the policy of the State lived—this at least must be said—within a wall of psychological superiority and inculcated obedience as the great end of being. Every effort was made even to convince the German people of their exclusive and seclusive superiority, and William himself, a "king by the grace of God," was not able to see what a tragic, pathetic, and humorous figure he made in the modern world of modern men. The whole psychological situation produced a dislocation of realities and a distortion of living truths.

The present war makes us comrades in arms of the two great popular Governments of western Europe, Great Britain and France. We have, I think, no real or fancied interest in mere territorial readjustment which would add to the power of either of these nations, but we are justified in having confidence in the democracy of France and the liberal forces of Great Britain. Our sympathy for France ought to teach us a great lesson. It shows us that republics are not ungrateful and that, after the lapse of 140 years, despite quarrels and disputes with the French Government, we are still bound down by sentimental ties of gratitude to France. We have come to see the undying strength of friendship between the masses of men and are given new hope that democracies, if they are willing to think, can not make war upon one another impetuously and in hatred. For England we still cherish, unfortunately, some of the old grievances that have been carried down, decade by decade, and taught through our school books to each succeeding generation. We have not been properly taught to see that our own Revolution was an English revolution, in which Englishmen of this side of the

ocean were striving for the development and maintenance of liberty, and that that war, too, was a war against an arrogant leaden-headed aristocracy. Misunderstanding of Britain comes from the failure to appreciate the development of liberalism in her Government, until she stands forth to-day as a great representative of democracy and of belief in the power and will of the common people.

To lose sight of England's transformation, in which we have had a great part, is to lose sight of one of the most momentous developments of the last hundred years. Can we not forget crazy old George III and Lord North and the rest of his tribe, and remember the men of the middle century, the creators of modern British liberalism—Cobden, Bright, and Gladstone, and a myriad of bold commoners—who battled successfully to destroy "the fortress of feudalism"? Can we not learn how deeply we are involved in the mighty structure of the British Empire as we find the lessons of our own Revolution and of our later history wrought into the policy of world-wide dominion? Can we not see that the greatest empire of all history has been built on the lessons of liberty which Britain learned from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln? Can we not see the tremendous force of democracy and individual liberty when we know that thousands upon thousands of colonials gave their lives ungrudgingly at Galipoli and Ypres? Surely we must come to see that a democracy like France or a democratic empire like Great Britain runs our own risks, faces our own dangers, is subject to the faults and blunders which we know so well, and that we are not misled if the result of our efforts is to uphold a structure of imperial order based on the principles of justice, the strength of which has been so dramatically shown in the past three years. Sometimes one is asked ironically when, forsooth, England became the friend of America. The answer can be quickly given, and given with absolute historical accuracy. It was when the British Parliament in 1867 passed the second reform bill and England became a democracy—about two years and a half after the English aristocrats had fully seen their mistakes during our Civil War and had come to see that the greatest

statesman the nineteenth century had as yet produced was not born in a manor house on an English countryside, but in a log cabin in Kentucky. Likewise it can probably be safely said that France became our real friend, a nation with which we could work with open friendliness, when, with the downfall of Napoleon III, the republican institutions of France were finally and firmly established.

In the conduct of this war we must constantly remember that we have had hopes of rendering the world safe for democracy. With all our frailties, which we must openly confess, with all our wastefulness and with all our follies, this war has taught us, as nothing else could, that there is nothing upon which we can more safely rely than the plain sense of the plain people. Perhaps nothing shows this more conclusively than our reluctance and distaste for military conquest and our hesitation in making up our minds to fight. We may continually remember the words of Lord John Russell—and no one better than he had reason to know the truth: “All experience of human nature teaches us the fact, that men who possess a superiority, real or imaginary, over their fellow creatures will abuse the advantages they enjoy.” We must remember that we entered the war for peace, and we are offering a great sacrifice for a new world order. We believed that we could not get it by chiding Europe and refusing to do our part now, for Europe needed the assistance of an external power, disinterested and high-hearted. We may remember that we have covered a continent almost as large as the whole of Europe with self-governing Commonwealths. We may remember the unselfish side of the Monroe doctrine which we try to live up to as embodying a belief that nations may live their own lives; and we can call attention to Mexico, which we have allowed to wallow in revolutions and destroy American lives and property because we believe that only by trial can nations rise and that every nation is entitled to its own undisturbed revolution if there is hope for the struggling masses. And withal we must strive to save our own real selves, our own essential character; for what would it profit us if we fought the whole world and lost ourselves? We now know, if never



before, that war is horrible and demoniacally ridiculous; that peaceful relations between nations have been endangered by intrigue, greed, false pride, covetousness, and suspicion; that big armies do not make for peace, but beget arrogance; that human misconduct and discourtesy may make enemies, and that nothing is more vitiating than unmanly envy or fear of a prosperous neighbor; that democracy must be the basis of a sound political system, but it must be real, conscientious, intelligent, and open-minded, or we may plunge into cataclysmic anarchy. We may all take courage in remembering that the President of the United States has led us reluctantly and with unwilling feet into a war which we believe will help to establish democracy, humanity, and a sense of national duty without profit.





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